

# Feminist critique and Islamic feminism: the question of intersectionality

Contributor: Sara Salem (<http://postcolonialist.com/contributor/sara-salem/>)  
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## ABSTRACT

*Since its inception, mainstream Western feminism has constituted a site of exclusion on multiple fronts, a consequence of first-wave feminist assumptions that have continued to influence mainstream feminism. Questions of definition and change are central to any project aiming to bring about social, political and economic change, but definition brings with it an intrinsic risk of delineating borders that include some but exclude others. In other words, the act of defining constitutes an exercise of power that creates certain women's experiences as patriarchal and others' as emancipatory. This article focuses on the tensions that have often arisen within the feminist project on the subject of religion and religious women. Mainstream Western feminism has long had difficulties in engaging with women who are religious. On the one hand, it is argued that religion is an inherently patriarchal institution that by nature excludes women and renders them unequal to men. On the other hand, many women see themselves as feminists and as religious, thus raising important questions about whether feminism has conceptualized religion too simplistically. At the center of this debate is the question of choice and how judgements about choices are made, and by whom. In other words, who decides that religion is oppressive to women, and what power relations are inherent in such a decision? The aim is to contextualize the consistently exclusionary approach on the part of many feminists towards religious women through focusing on the specific case of Islamic feminism, as well as to question whether intersectionality poses a possible solution to this exclusion.*

## Introduction

"Religion can contribute to a post-patriarchal world." [1]

The silence around feminism and religion is a profound one, and its roots lie in the metanarrative of secularising[2] that influences knowledge production in the field of feminism (and more broadly the social sciences). The silence functions to highlight not only a difficulty in approaching the subject of female autonomy in relation to religion, but also indicates a negativity towards religion on the part of feminist scholars.[3] Although there has been a significant amount of work on religion and patriarchy as well as on agency, autonomy, and gender; there has been little on the specific subject of women, religion and autonomy.

In an article by Elina Vuola, it is argued a shallow or condescending view of religion in the part of feminist scholars has meant that they do not see the full picture:

"On the one hand, there is a kind of feminist 'blindness' of, or resistance to, the importance of religion for women. On the other hand, there is a 'religious paradigm' type of feminist studies in which women are seen mainly through the lens of religion, especially in research done by Western scholars on Muslim countries." [4]

This reflects the tension within the literature: while there is a focus on women and religion, this focus is problematic as it reproduces religion as inherently patriarchal and women as lacking autonomy in relation to said religion. This has especially been the case in studies on "women and Islam," a genre that has grown exponentially since the attacks on September 11, 2001. In this paper I want to focus on the feminist 'blindness' Vuola mentions, and try to unpack the various reasons why mainstream Western feminism has largely neglected the area of religious women.

## Delineating the contours of feminism

"The limitations of feminism are evident in the construction of the (implicitly consensual) priority of issues around which apparently all women are expected to organize." [5]

An important underlying point about mainstream Western feminism is that of secularism.[6] This is due to its genealogy, which links back to the European Enlightenment. Rationalism and a focus on civil rights have thus been central.[7] Critical theory has moved past secular humanism (also a product of the Enlightenment) through focusing on the tragedy of colonialism (Edward Said), critiquing European humanism (Michel Foucault) and deconstructing the center (Jacques Derrida). These theories served to de-center Europe and critically question the Enlightenment and the centrality of secular discourse. Importantly, scholars have pointed to the "Judeo-Christian" (itself a problematic construct) heritage of secularism emphasizing that the negation of religion is still a mode of relation.[8] This also served to construct Islam (as opposed to Judeo-Christianity) as outside of modernity. Within feminism, postcolonial and black feminists have never been overtly secular, and in fact religion and in particular spirituality has long been central to their worldviews and work[9], in stark contrast to mainstream feminism.[10]

Mainstream Western feminism today has evolved mainly from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century first and second wave feminist movements in Europe and America. While it has come to incorporate a wider variety of experiences and analytical lenses since then, there is little doubt that many of its assumptions have changed little over time. Moreover, as an academic discipline it continues to be heavily influenced by both modernism generally and positivism in particular, thus inevitably reproducing problematic notions of objectivity in research and universal truths. Its inheritance of first wave feminist ideals also ensures an essentialized notion of women that are on the margins of their own experiences, including religious women.

Chandra Mohanty has written extensively on the production of the "Third World Woman" discursively, documenting how scholarship about women in the third world has been formed through categories of feminist analysis that are Western. The term Western feminism is broad and to some extent homogenizes the various movements that comprise it. Nevertheless, there is a certain body of knowledge with certain underlying assumptions that together distinguish a general approach that can be termed Western feminism. As Mohanty writes,

"Clearly Western feminist discourse and political practice is neither singular nor homogenous in its goals, interests or analyses. However, it is possible to trace a coherence of effects resulting from the implicit assumption of "the West" (in all its complexities and contradictions as the primary referent in theory and praxis. My reference to "Western feminism" is by no means intended to imply that it is a monolith. Rather, I am attempting to draw attention to the similar effects of various textual strategies used by particular writers that codify Others as non-Western and hence themselves as (implicitly) Western." [11]

Underlying assumptions that distinguish what can be called "Western feminism" include: the theorization of "women" as an unproblematic category of analysis that assumes women have homogenous or similar experiences and needs, which serves to construct a "universal" womanhood that erases power relations between women; the subsequent use of academic research to prove the universality of women's experiences; and the construction of third world women as the opposite of Western women: in other words, constrained, victimized, poor, ignorant as opposed to Western women who are educated, modern, and free to make their own choices.[12] "Women are characterized as a singular group on the basis of shared oppression." [13]

Importantly, Mohanty points out that feminist scholarly practices are inscribed within relations of power, since there can be no apolitical scholarship.[14] The knowledge production on the part of Western feminists colonizes *discursively* the "material and historical heterogeneities" of the lives of third world women, thus resulting in the production of a singular "Third World Woman." [15] This knowledge production occurs within a global system that is made up of specific relations of power, as Anouar Abdel-Malek points out:

"Contemporary imperialism is a hegemonic imperialism, exercising to a maximum degree a rationalized violence through the fire and the sword but also through hearts and minds. For its content is defined by the combined action of the military-industrial complex and the hegemonic cultural centers of the West, all of them founded on the advanced levels of development attained by monopoly and finance capital." [16]

Western feminists, therefore, are situated within a global system. In other words, the way the "third world" has been constructed [17] forms the context of any scholarship on women in said third world. The lack of awareness of this, as well as the lack of self-reflexivity has meant that scholars within the field have often reproduced imperial notions in their work on women in non-Western contexts or marginalized women with Western contexts themselves.

Black American feminists were the first to argue that mainstream feminism did not, and could not, represent their experiences by only taking gender into account as the most important variable and thus constituting "woman" as a singular category *a priori*. They insisted that their realities were far more complex than this: they were women; but they were also black, poor/rich, urban/rural, educated/uneducated, and so on. [18] All of these different aspects of their identities combined in order to create their realities. At first, the "triple oppression" notion was created, which argued that Black women suffer from three different oppressions: class, race, and gender. [19] This later became the holy triad of feminist studies: race-gender-class. Intersectionality was later to add other identities such as sexuality, disability, and so on. This was to take apart the notion of a universal woman, and bring to the forefront the idea that "woman" is a contested notion with vastly different experiences and subjectivities. [20] For this reason, it is problematic to speak of a "universal feminism" or a "universal woman."

Intersectionality would later become widespread among feminist scholars who were working from a post-modernist or post-structuralist perspective. What Black, lesbian (and later queer), and Marxist feminists did was to address the "most central theoretical and normative concern within feminist scholarship: namely, the acknowledgment of differences among women. This is because it touches on the most pressing problem facing contemporary feminism: the long and painful legacy of its exclusions. This legacy of exclusion has been articulated particularly well by scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw, who pointed out that feminist theory remains *white*, and therefore its potential to include non-privileged women remains unrealized. [21]

The discursive construction of third world women as homogenous and disempowered is similar to the construction of religious women as uniformly and automatically oppressed or suffering from false consciousness. Religious women are thus produced as a homogenous bloc who cannot or will not see the inherent patriarchy in religion. When it comes to Muslim women, this is amplified due to the already-prevalent construction of third world women (of which Muslim women are assumed to belong to) as oppressed and victimized. This construction serves to hide the specificities of each woman's lived reality and instead centers the debate on false consciousness.

## Agency, autonomy, and subjectivity

Framing the debate around religion in terms of "choices" made by women or forced on women already reveals a liberal ontology where agency—the free

exercise of behaviour—becomes the signifier of female emancipation. Similarly, framing the debate around “rights” granted to women by religion or “rights” taken away from women by religion also reveals a liberal ontology. In other words, arguing whether religions are patriarchal based on the types of “rights” women have reproduces an approach to feminism that assumes an individualistic premise, which is a key part of the secular metanarrative that informs feminist scholarship today, which I will discuss below. The idea of a higher being that transcends the individual is already a transgression of the secular and liberal worldview in which individual autonomy is central.

Related to the question of agency is that of autonomy, defined as exercising choice, satisfying individual preferences, and the capacity for rational self-government.[22] Agency and autonomy are defined in relation to external powers that attempt to stifle individualism and create relationships of dependency. As pointed out by Phyllis Mack, feminism has spent a lot of time discussing agency while taking certain assumptions embedded within the concept for granted.

This focus on agency and autonomy stems from the metanarrative of secularisation.[23] According to this narrative, religious women are seen as possessing no agency, in contradistinction to secular society, “which locates religious authority and practice outside the spheres of politics or the marketplace, allows for domains of free, autonomous behaviour.” [24]

Related to this is the problematic creation of a binary between what is secular and what is spiritual. This has emerged in particular due to assumptions about modernity and progress, which state that individuals move from a state of religiosity towards a state of secularity, thus evoking a linear progression of time. Not only does this create a binary between the secular and the spiritual, it neglects the fact that many religious movements are profoundly modern.

A key tension within these debates over agency and religion is the blanket depiction of religion as oppressive, which raises the pertinent issue of subjectivity. Scholars have pointed out that many women choose to submit themselves to a higher power, and do not interpret this as a form of oppression. In Mack’s study of Quaker women, she reflects that attempts by women to displace social norms were done from a position of obedience rather than a position of will. This has been echoed by Saba Mahmood in her study of Islamist women in Cairo, who effectively challenged social norms as an act of obedience to God. This obedience, however, was to a transcendental power, not men or patriarchal systems. Moreover, this obedience is conceptualized as voluntary: disciplinary practices of religious people can often show both how one becomes subjected to relations of power but also creates space within those relations for the exercise of agency[25] a concept Foucault discussed by stating that the same conditions that damage can also lead to resistance or transcendence.[26]

Other authors have worked on the agency and autonomy of Muslim women by centering processes of re-interpretation and contextualization of the Islamic texts. Asma Barlas discusses questions of religious knowledge and religious authority to show how patriarchy has been read into the Qur’an and argues that the Qur’an supports complete gender equality.[27] Judith Tucker’s work has tried to understand how Islamic scholars have interpreted issues related to women and gender roles over time. Tucker argues that Islamic law has been more fluid and flexible than is often assumed, and that women’s concerns and needs often influenced *fatwas* given by scholars.[28] Kecia Ali’s book, *Sexual Ethics in Islam*, explores what makes an act or belief ethical in the eyes of God. Ali touches on very sensitive topics and uses the Qur’an, Hadith and jurisprudence to answer questions that have long been the purveyor of men.[29] Although not all of these authors consider themselves Islamic feminists, their work has been central to challenging male authority and interpretative privilege in Islam, and re-centering women’s autonomy. Tucker demonstrates that women’s needs and concerns often shaped Islamic law; Barlas argues that patriarchy has been read into the Qur’an and thus distorted the text itself; and Ali shows that a more complex reading of the Islamic sources reveals very different interpretations of key verses. Thus they all contribute to scholarship that has female agency at its core, as have numerous other scholars working on gender and Islam.[30]

Gender within Islamist movements has also been studied. Nilufer Göle and Barbara Pusch have both written about the phenomenon of feminism being articulated by women within the Islamist movement in Turkey, and argues that the structures within Islamism that reproduce gender inequality are making these women question issues of gender in Islam (as opposed to leaving Islam).[31] Göle argues that we can speak of a post-Islamist stage where Islamism is losing its relevance but at the same time permeating social and cultural life; and it is this space within which Islamic feminism is growing.[32]

Despite this, women working from within Islamic movements or interpretations often have the effect of further reproducing patriarchal norms. Mahmood has pointed out that the women she worked with in Cairo—part of the “Islamic revival movement”—chose to be part of structures that view women as unequal to men. This raises important questions about choice feminism, which has come to dominate critiques of mainstream Western feminism. Portraying feminism as the “freedom to choose” not only (again) reproduces notions of agency as central to feminism, but also raises questions about what to do when women *choose* to be part of structures that view men as superior and thus reproduce forms of gender inequality. More importantly, such an argument assumes that “choices” exist and can be made outside of power relations. Choices are never “free” in the sense that they are never made outside of power structures or hegemonic systems and ideals. Nevertheless, it is clear that certain “choices” have been designated as feminist of emancipatory while others have been designated as oppressive. Following this, women who make “choices” that are seen as oppressive are suffering from false consciousness and thus have not reached the stage of liberation other women have reached—again reproducing the linear view of time where progress is measured as a continuum, with Western women at the top. Moreover, although beyond the scope of this article, it is pertinent to note that the way certain choices have been designated as emancipatory and others as oppressive is itself enmeshed within power relations stemming from both (various forms of) patriarchy and Western mainstream feminism.

One way to reconcile[33] agency with religion is to reconceptualize the concept of agency itself. Women who use religion to displace social norms reflect a capacity for action, and demonstrate a concept of agency used by Judith Butler among others.[34] In this perspective, agency and autonomy can be found where there are challenges to power. Thus an attempt by religious women to challenge social norms reflects an act of agency, not insubordination. However, a reconceptualization of agency such as this one still reproduces agency as central to these debates, and agency remains a strongly liberal concept. Mahmood has attempted to move past both emancipation and agency as they continue to produce a teleology of emancipation that portrays women as either struggling, resisting, or subverting—but never active.

## Choice, the homogenization of religion, and the re-interpretation of texts

A key issue that emerges from the debates outlined above is that of choice: put simply, who defines which choices fall within the parameters of feminism and which do not? However, once one accepts the premise that socialization constructs the choices that are available and acceptable, as well as ideas of what is emancipatory and what is oppressive, then it follows that these can be deconstructed, particularly in terms of unpacking the power relations they are

linked to. This complicates the question of choice as well as of definition.

Defining the contours of what is feminist and what is not (or what is patriarchal and what is not), a process of essentialization and homogenization often takes place. These processes of representing entire cultures as homogenous, static, and essentialized is a classic feature of Orientalism, and has been reproduced in much Western mainstream feminist literature on religion, especially with regards to Islam. The implicit or explicit assumption that "Islam is patriarchal" not only assumes that there is an "Islam" but that patriarchy has already been pre-defined—but by whom? Many discussions that revolve around patriarchy and religion assume an essentialized version of Islam that simply does not exist in the lived realities of Muslim women. As soon as a text interacts with its reader or listener, the outcome is an interpretation that will differ from other interpretations. While the boundaries of interpretation may be somewhat defined by scholarly consensus—among other sources of authority—the content itself cannot be said to constitute a homogenous "Islam" that can then be labelled as patriarchal.

While academia is only part of the problem in portraying Muslim women as oppressed by religion (feminist activism often does the same), it is notable that feminist academics have also had problems approaching the religious women from a perspective that does not minimize their agency. Saba Mahmood has commented on how various feminist historians, for example, treat women within religious institutions as needing to be reformed or modernized.[35] Dipesh Chakrabarty proposes that there needs to be a form of history that abandons its secular epistemology by

"Rendering the claims to divine agency visible and plausible. This allows an academic historian to both engage the hegemonic terms of the discipline of secular history constructively and to expose the violence this narrative commits against life world and imaginaries that are not encompassable within a secular framework." [36]

Islam has long played a central role in feminist debates, and has consistently been defined as being outside of the parameters set by Western mainstream feminism and thus as intrinsically patriarchal. This does not negate the fact, however, that to many women Islam forms a central aspect of their lives and their lived experiences. While religion itself is a highly contested term, there is little doubt that to many it provides a spiritual framework with which to view and experience the world. This spirituality serves as a counter-point in a world in which rationality is valued above all other systems of meaning—another expression of the metanarrative of secularising.

Islamic feminism constitutes a field that can be broadly defined as an attempt to exercise power over knowledge production and meaning making within Islam. This movement has flourished in several places, particularly Iran,[37] Morocco,[38] and the United States[39]. Scholars within this field are attempting to dismantle misogynist interpretations of Islam through different interpretative methodologies. Fatima Mernissi in particular has been important in this process, as she has argued that many popular Hadith which have been used to support gender inequality in Islam are actually false. Importantly, she makes this argument using traditional Islamic methodology—the same methodology used by men who have consistently propagated these same Hadith.[40]

Religious texts constitute the main battleground on which many of these debates take place, whereby these texts are constituted as either inherently patriarchal or are conceptualized as needing re-interpretation that would allow for feminist readings. The focus on patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadith tend to center men as interpretative authorities and ignore movements that call for more inclusive or feminist readings of these texts. The argument is that religion is patriarchal regardless of interpretation, even though every act of understanding is an act of interpretation. Muslim women who write about feminism and Islam have raised questions about the monopoly on interpretation. Riffat Hassan writes:

"Men have taken on the task of defining the ontological, theoretical, sociological and eschatological status of Muslim women." [41]

Hassan raises the important point that as long as women are defined as theologically inferior, the battle for sociological, political or economic rights will not go very far. For believers, the theological definition of human equality and the equality of men and women's souls is as important as other aspects of gender equality.[42] Hassan argues that a return to the Qur'an would allow for the theological equality of Muslim men and women to emerge. Thus we see that even Islamic feminists use the religious texts as the grounds for their argument about patriarchy and Islam. In other words, the Qur'an is post-patriarchal and thus a return to it would render Islam post-patriarchal, but only if this return is predicated on different interpretative practices. It is useful to note that this is not necessarily about women re-interpreting the texts, since women are just as capable of reproducing patriarchal interpretations as men. Rather it is a question of the approaches women and men use in interpretation. Many scholars who focus on feminism and Islam favour historicizing as a key approach in re-interpretation, as it contextualizes certain practices and thus renders them as inapplicable today.

While some scholars within feminism engage with these re-interpretations and then reject them as insufficient in creating a new framework of understanding, [43] other scholars simply refrain from engagement at all. This lack of engagement is what is problematic, and it frames the attempts to re-interpret Islam by Muslims as further proof of false consciousness. This stance is contradictory coming from movements that claim to take women and their experiences seriously.

There are two assumptions at play here. The first is that women are always passive, and in rare instances when they are not, they are resisting. Thus attempts to re-interpret religious texts will always fall into one of these narratives. This creates a binary view of action that is difficult to overcome. It situates women within two separate realms of action that go on to define any action taken by these women. In effect, if they are passive and accepting, they are oppressed; whereas if they are resisting—although it is seen as a more 'autonomous' act—they are still responding or reacting to a specific audience and narrative. In other words, it is reactionary. Who are they resisting? Who are they proving a point to? It is simply another relation of power, whereby women are *constituting* the system they are said to be resisting *by resisting it*.

The second assumption is that religion and religious texts are seen as the domains of men: thus in effect much of mainstream feminist discourse reifies the precise point many Islamic feminists are trying to disprove: that religious texts belong to men.

To conclude this section, I want to reiterate that the focus of my critique is on the decision on the part of many feminists to not engage with scholars who attempt to represent religion as more than simply inherently patriarchal. The Islamic feminist project can be seen as an important attempt to challenge knowledge production and meaning making within a confined space. Traditional male interpretations have dominated for centuries, thus managing to construct "Islamic ideals" that have delineated the borders of what Muslim femininity is. Simply the act of re-interpretation is a challenge to this, and constitutes an attempt to imagine and construct a different reality, which is already an exercise of power.

"A feminist critique of religion stresses the dismantling of religious legitimization for certain political and cultural practices; it critically

analyses the power structures of religious communities; it reminds us that there is no Christianity or Islam but different forms and interpretations; and that the determinant role of religion in society should be questioned.”[44]

In the next section I want to suggest that a way out of these predicaments is by focusing less on essentialized notions of feminism and religion, and more on the lived realities of women who are religious. By centering experience, feminism can move away from the problematic of definition (which by extension is always a process of exclusion) and try to explore the option of multiple feminisms. Intersectionality is one way of theorizing such a move.

## Intersectionality and its limits

The theory of intersectionality is a relatively new theoretical approach to doing research in the social sciences. First conceptualized by feminists of colour, it has now been adopted by other disciplines such as sociology, race studies and ethnography. The context in which intersectionality arose is extremely important in trying to understand the theory itself. Soon after the spread of first wave feminism in America & Europe, critiques began to surface from women who felt excluded by the discourse being used by first wave feminists. Above all, the claim to represent women universally was problematized by women who felt that their experiences were very different from the average white Western middle-class woman whom the first wave feminist movement was largely comprised of.

Epistemologically, intersectionality falls within post-modernism and post-structuralism, which both constitute powerful critiques of modernism and positivism. Modernism is seen as an “arrogant metanarrative, a universal story that claims to be superior to other stories of what it means to be human—a story capable of evaluating all other stories.”[45] Post-modernism argues that grand narratives are to be rejected, and multiple perspectives should form part of any research project. As mentioned previously, grand narratives, universalizing tendencies and the assumption that a researcher can be objective have all been important aspects of Western mainstream feminism. Post-structuralism values judgement from below, as opposed to the structures that disguise the exercise of power from above.[46]

Intersectionality arose as a direct response to the exclusionary nature of much of mainstream feminism. Thus its main accomplishment has been to be more inclusive of varying experiences, realities and identities, as well as to become more aware of the way power functions in order to exclude/include. Intersectionality functioned as a more complex methodology where different sources of oppression were looked at simultaneously, and understood as influencing one another in very complex ways.

Aside from Black feminists, other groups of feminists such as Marxist, lesbian, and post-colonial feminists were also analysing the relationships between various systems of oppression (such as capitalism, sexuality, nationalism) and gender. European and post-colonial feminists, for example, were doing so by developing feminist standpoint theory.[47] Standpoint theory emphasized that research should be done from the perspective of the marginalized, as their view of society is more comprehensive. Women’s experiences should therefore lay the grounds for feminist knowledge.[48] The term *intersectionality* itself was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an African-American legal scholar who was part of the discipline of critical race studies in the 1980s, which aimed at unpacking the supposed neutrality and objectivity of the law.[49] Crenshaw wanted to show how the single-axis framework often used by feminists should be replaced by intersectionality, which could better demonstrate the ways in which race and gender interact.[50] In effect, intersectionality represents a means of looking at multiple layers of identities in order to analyse how they interact with one another. The issue of power is a recurrent one, as is the critique of the idea that gender should have primacy in feminist analyses.

Intersectionality thus allows for a complex analysis of people’s lived experiences that takes into consideration not only various marginalizations but analyses how these marginalizations and positionalities intersect in order to create unique situations. It is a process of complicating research through addressing the way multiple positionalities intersect with one another. Importantly, it represents fluid, constantly expanding theoretical notions. As more scholars engage with it, more intersectionalities emerge. The example of masculinities is illustrative of how intersectionality has moved past the classic race/gender/class configuration and has adopted many other positionalities that are often neglected such as masculinity, disability, age, sexuality, transnationality and so on.

While there has been much intersectional research since Crenshaw’s ground-breaking article, little has been done on the topic of religion and feminism from an intersectional perspective. On the one hand, there is the risk that intersectional approaches could still reproduce the assumptions present in much of mainstream feminism. On the other hand, I argue that intersectionality as an approach has the ability to overcome this bias. The aim of intersectionality is to listen to the voices of women and men on their own terms, in order to piece together narratives and unpack experiences that can help in understanding social life. The emphasis is thus on the voices of those being listened to, not on pre-set categories of research or pre-set assumptions. This provides space within which religious women can speak and not be confined to certain narratives. Intersectional research would allow religious experiences to be part of the narrative, because those speaking are setting the narrative. In other words, personal narratives are central, and this makes the subject central to the story. This is not to say that researchers employing an intersectional approach will not have pre-set assumptions—we all do. But intersectionality forces researchers to confront, rather than disguise or explain away, these assumptions.

While intersectionality has been ground breaking for feminist research, there are numerous points of critique that need to be highlighted. Critiques towards intersectionality have highlighted several issues, ranging from the fact that highlighting the “marginalized” seems to reproduce knowledge that claims to *know* and *represent* the “Other” and that becomes part of the industry of knowledge-production; to Judith Butler’s point that the ‘etc.’ that follows at the end of lists of social categories signals an “embarrassed admission of exhaustion” as well as an “illimitable process of signification.”[51] This can be somewhat avoided by using the concept of “master categories” and the recognition that in specific situations, certain social divisions are more important than others.[52] However in doing this it is important to understand that different positionalities have different logics and operate at different levels.[53] Another critique that has been levelled against intersectionality is that it does not problematize the use of categories, thus viewing humans as made up of various categorical and “innate” aspects that, when studied together using an intersectional approach, can expose the human being in question.

“A critique of intersectionality that takes the category as ontologically problematic or certain is the stage for the entrance of a transcendent subject or subjects.”[54]

The reliance on categories can even lead to intersectionality being portrayed as positivist, as the category is supposed to lead to “authentic” knowledge about the experiences of marginalized women.[55] Scholars such as Wolf have argued that instead of taking categories as *names of things*, we should instead understand them as “bundles of relationships and place them back into the field from which they were abstracted.”[56] Others have argued that floating categories can be replaced by signifiers that are grounded in the lives of specific women, and that representations should never be seen as showing us the

"essence" of a person.[57] Crenshaw has responded to these critiques by pointing out that categories can sometimes be empowering, and by arguing that even if categories are socially constructed, it does not negate the real effects they have on the lives of people.[58]

## Conclusion

The metanarrative of secularising constitutes the assumptions underlying much of mainstream Western feminism, and explains the difficulties the field has had engaging women who are religious, as well as addressing the agency of religious women in non-simplistic terms. While critiques have moved the feminism discipline forward, it remains largely Western and secular. This means that when movements such as Islamic feminism emerge, the response has been to either label them as further proof of false consciousness, or to not engage with them at all. The key tension remains the unwillingness to engage with religious women on their own terms, instead of the apriori assumptions of religious patriarchy that rely on the homogenization of religions.

In order to address the complexity of feminist research, a focus on the lived experiences of women themselves may provide a way forward. Focusing on lived experiences makes intersectionality a useful approach in the study of women and religion. Conceptualizing religion as a positionality may prove a useful way of doing research that does not apriori reject the experiences of religious women as patriarchal. The use of narratives is one methodological approach that can be used to achieve an intersectional analysis. Personal narratives aim to situate the subject within the full network of relationships that define their social locations, but some have pointed out that usually it is only possible to situate them from the partial perspective of the specific social group being studied.[59]

A critical intersectionality-based assessment of the feminist field in general can help in decolonizing the continued Eurocentrism that plagues the field. Until assumptions of what constitutes patriarchy are thoroughly decolonized, feminism will continue to reproduce dynamics and analysis that excludes women who live different realities.

## FOOTNOTES

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33. It should be noted that the notion of reconciliation is also a problematic concept linked to a liberal ontology.
34. Ibid: 156.
35. Mahmood 2004: 575.
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37. See: Afsaneh Najmabadi and Ziba Mir-Hosseini.
38. See: Fatima Mernissi and Asma Lamrabet.
39. See: Amina Wadud, Khaled abou el Fadl, Kecia Ali and Asma Barlas.
40. One could raise the question, posed by Audre Lourde, of whether the master's tools can bring down the master's house. Numerous Islamic feminists have chosen to use "traditional" methodology, which unquestionably gives their interpretations more legitimacy. However methodologies never exist outside of power relations, and thus one could question the assumption that traditional methodologies used to interpret Islam are objective.
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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sara Saleem is a PhD researcher at the Institute of Social Studies in the Netherlands. Her work focuses on historical and institutional perspectives on political economy, and centers specifically on the recent wave of uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa.

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